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Sparkle Plenty

BY AMY TAUBIN

THREE FILMS BY WARREN SONBERT. At the Collective for Living Cinema, January 23.

Warren Sonbert makes shifty, chameleonlike films, except that, unlike chameleons, their opulent surfaces are easily identified; it's their inside, the color of their meaning, that's volatile (and for some, invisible). Films, like most art works, tend to move around a bit, depending on the condition of their exhibition, the situation of the viewer and of course, the historic moment. In Sonbert's, the instability is built in—it's the modus operandi of his editing stance. It's striking therefore that Sonbert's show at the Collective adds up to more than the sum of its three parts—*Hall of Mirrors* (1966), *Divided Loyalties* (1978), and *The Cup and the Lip* (1986). Spanning almost his entire career, the films resonate against one another in ways that intensify their emotional impact.

Made when Sonbert was in his teens, *Hall of Mirrors* opens with outtakes from a 1948 Hollywood melodrama. A woman (Florence Eldridge) flings herself fists first on the funhouse mirror where she appears imprisoned to infinite regression and then, leaning on her troubled but uncomprehending husband (Fredric March), is shepherded into a taxi. With his fedora and clipped moustache and her fussy oversized hat and big-shouldered "topper" coat, the pair resemble the middle-class parents of the baby-boom (Sonbert's) generation as they recorded themselves in countless home movies with the 8mm cameras they bought with their new postwar affluence. The following sequences are portraits of two Warhol "superstars" composed from fairly crude, underexposed, extended hand-held camera shots. The first is of a tearful teenage Rene Richard, lounging around his Indian-curtained, scarf-lampshaded, significantly mirrored apartment; the second is of Gerard Malanga at a gallery opening, preening inside a Lucas Samaras mirrored sculpture. In the casual juxtaposition of these three sequences Sonbert nails the psychological and historical connection between the solipsistic narcissism of his own generation and the hysteria and despair of its parents at their dawning recognition of the trap of the nuclear family.

The underpinnings of Sonbert's vocation as a filmmaker are all here. Combining dated with contemporary footage reflects his sense of film as a historic artifact. Although he eschews found footage in later films, they are as influenced by the expressive qualities of Hollywood melodramas as by his independent film peers. The hall of mirrors suggests the regression of time—how the immediacy of the recording process is distanced first by editing and subsequently through successively removed screenings so that today *Hall of Mirrors* is all of a piece, both prophecy and ancient history.

By the time Sonbert made *Divided Loyalties*, he had evolved the form that characterizes his mature films. Gone are extended shots and ironic musical supports. The films of the '70s and '80s are austerely silent and composed of brief, elliptical shots. What was once a minimal narrative has been replaced by visual puns, metaphors, and associations of both form and content. The films are so dense it's impossible to apprehend them at a single viewing. One may come away as from a dream, aware of having seen much but remembering nothing. Yet Sonbert's detailed, rational imagery is in no way oneiric. The title *Divided Loyalties* refers literally to the stuff above and below the editing splice as well as to its subject matter—which pulls between East and West coast, between America and Europe, art and industry, sex and friendship. The links run fore and aft so that the connections are almost never dualistic.



Rats: Sonbert's *The Cup and the Lip*

Sonbert's most recent film refines the premises of his work over the past 15-odd years. His bravura acrobatic camera and editing style of the '70s pale next to the seemingly effortless spectacle he produces today. *The Cup and the Lip* opens with a military parade in Budapest during the week of Chernobyl and draws to a close with the demonstration that marked Sandra Day O'Connor's visit to San Francisco after the Supreme Court ruling on the sodomy law (followed by a shot of animal prints on the art auction block). Everywhere inflected with the presence of police and the military, it is Sonbert's darkest work